

Social inequality and oligarchy in the US and Europe

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A paper published in March by French economist Thomas Piketty cites data showing that the “democratic” political systems in the US, France and Britain are oligarchies in which all the major parties are tools of the super rich, serving to manipulate the population and crush social opposition from below.

The paper, titled “Brahmin Left vs. Merchant Right: Rising Inequality and the Changing Structure of Political Conflict,” shows that the traditional “left” parties of the political establishment—the Democratic Party in the US, the Labour Party in Britain and the Socialist Party in France—have become the preferred parties of significant sections of the ruling elite, abandoning any pretense of social reform. Though the study does not explicitly address parties such as the German Social Democratic Party, the Spanish Socialist Party and the Italian Democratic Party, the process Piketty describes is a universal one.

“The general conclusion is clear,” Piketty writes. “We have gradually moved from a class-based party system to what I propose to label a ‘multiple-elite’ party system. Back in the 1950s-1960s, the party system was defined along class lines: the vote for the left-wing parties was associated to both low-education and low-income voters, while the vote for right-wing parties was associated to both high-education and high-income voters.”

These days are gone. Today, the political systems in these three countries have “little to do with the ‘left’ vs. ‘right’ party system of the 1950s-1960s” because the formerly “left” parties now mirror in social composition and program their Republican, Gaullist and Tory counterparts. “Each of the two governing coalitions alternating in power tends to reflect the views and interests of a different elite,” Piketty writes.

The absence of any major party with working class

support helps “explain rising inequality”, because there are no mechanisms through which the working class can influence the direction of government policy. This has produced widespread disillusionment in the working class, which Piketty claims is responsible for both the rise of mass abstentionism and the strengthening of right-wing populism “as low education, low income voters might feel abandoned.”

The chart below tracks the difference between the Democratic Party share of voters in the top 10 percent of the income scale versus the Democratic Party share of voters in the bottom 90 percent over time.

The chart shows that in the 1940s through the early 1970s, working class voters were far more likely to support the Democratic presidential candidate. This began to shift in the mid-1970s, changing drastically over the course of the Obama presidency and culminating in the 2016 election, in which the Democratic vote share was 10 percent higher among the top 10 percent than it was among the bottom 90 percent.

The following chart breaks down the share of the Democratic vote by income decile over the course of each presidential election from 1948 to 2016. The bright red line, showing the Democratic share in 2016, indicates that almost 60 percent of voters in the top 10 percent, top 5 percent and top 1 percent voted for the Democratic Party, the first time a majority of the wealthy and affluent voted for the Democratic candidate. The Democrats have won more than 40 percent of the wealthy vote only in the 1990s and 2000s. In the 1950s through 1970s, the top 1, 5 and 10 percent supported Republicans by margins ranging from 70 percent-30 percent to 85 percent-15 percent.

In France, a similar process is playing out. In the 2017 elections, for the first time in the history of the

Fifth Republic, voters in the top 10 percent of the income distribution were more likely to support “left” parties (including the Stalinist French Communist Party, Jean-Luc Melenchon’s France Insoumise and Emmanuel Macron’s La République En Marche).

In Britain, the same basic shift is taking place, though the Labour Party’s share among the bottom 90 percent remains about 11 percent higher than among the top 10 percent. However, this figure is down substantially from the roughly 40 percent higher vote share which Labour received among workers in the 1964 and 1966 general elections, won by Labour candidate Harold Wilson.

The Democratic, Labour and Socialist parties have found new social constituencies among the elite as they have loyally prosecuted the interests of the capitalist class. In each country, they have slashed funding for social programs, reduced workers’ wages and provided trillions in bank bailouts and corporate tax cuts, paving the way for an unprecedented growth in social inequality.

The British Labour Party, despite the pacifist phraseology of Jeremy Corbyn, is no less pro-war than the Tories, while in France and the US the Socialists and Democrats are the most aggressive advocates of imperialist expansion. Under Democratic President Barack Obama, Socialist Party President Francois Hollande and Labour prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, these parties have bombed, invaded or established a military presence in most of the Middle East, Central Asia and large parts of North and Central Africa. Just last week, these parties and their conservative counterparts joined forces to bomb Syria on the basis of a fabricated pretext.

The immense concentration of wealth within each country and worldwide has transformed the governments of the “democratic” imperialist countries into oligarchies that can brook no opposition to their programs of war and social counterrevolution. Such forms of rule are incompatible with basic democratic rights, as evidenced by the Democrats’ oversight of mass surveillance and police violence in the US, the Socialist Party’s implementation of a permanent state of emergency in France, and the Labour Party’s refusal to protect whistleblower Julian Assange from the looming threat of US prosecution.

The leaders and functionaries of the Democratic,

Socialist and Labour parties have joined enthusiastically in the march to the right, which was made possible by the trade unions, which suppressed and isolated the struggles of the working class in each country. Employing the poison of nationalism, the unions responded to the globalization of the world’s productive forces by entering into a corporatist alliance with “their” ruling classes against the workers. They chained workers politically to the Democratic and Labour parties in the US and UK and to the Socialist and Stalinist parties in France.

The data underlying the Piketty report makes clear that the “left” bourgeois parties and the trade unions are institutions of oligarchic domination, which is why workers are abandoning these organizations in droves. But at precisely this moment, pseudo-left groups such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the US, Momentum and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the UK, and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France are urging workers and youth to put their faith in efforts to work with these parties and the trade unions, pressuring them to adopt pro-worker reforms.

This bankrupt orientation is not merely a political mistake. It is a reflection of the rightward shift within the upper-middle class layers that form the base of these anti-Marxist and anti-working class organizations.

On a world scale, a massive political polarization is taking place. The top 10 percent, fearful of losing its privileged position, is shifting to the right. The bottom 90 percent—billions of workers worldwide—is entering into a conflict with the oligarchy and its political representatives that has revolutionary implications.



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